the Centenary College Choir

Celebrating Fifty Years
of
"America's Singing Ambassadors"

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by Cynthia Lewis

This book is dedicated by one who loves the choir, Alberta Broyles, to her husband Harvey — who, if possible loves it more.

Some experiences stay with one throughout a lifetime.

For the more than 700 of us, the Centenary College Choir is such an experience.

Not only do we learn how to sing together, we learn how to work together. We thrive in an atmosphere where our talents and abilities are appreciated. We learn to value those close to us, and the many strangers we meet on the road. The Centenary Choir experience is more than great music and visiting new places - it serves as a loving laboratory for learning and using human relations and management skills that serve us well throughout life.

Many of us meet music of the great masters for the first time. And we remember those rare times when a spirit moves through us when we sing with all our hearts — when we are "on." Our collective spirits and voices combine with a mysterious universal power. We feel an inspired excellence. So does the audience. The thunder of their applause combines with our pride in a job well done to create a cherished moment when we feel the goose bumps and adrenalin rush of the "performer's high."

We cherish the memories. Pictures hang in a place of honor. Choir propaganda reminds us of important values. A keepsake choir handbook, trip book and travel code serves as a model for organization and standard setting in our work with other groups. There are other reminders — a brick, a pin, a luggage tag, a paper weight, a nickname. We keep up with other alums, or at least think about them frequently. And most of us still have our jackets even though the cut is out of fashion or the color never flattered our individual skin tone. We just can't part with that jacket. After all, it has our names sewn in so we will always know it is ours.

1960-61

1943-44

Far East - 1957

1963-64

The truth is, the legacy, the lessons and the relationships will always be ours, with or without the physical reminders. We carry the Centenary College Choir in our hearts. The stories and the values are worth revisiting, especially in a golden anniversary year.

The Value Of the Centenary Choir

Dr. Donald Webb, now president emeritus of Centenary College summarizes the value of the Centenary Choir program.

"There is no question that it is fun to be part of the choir. It is a rich part of a student's life in terms of the quality of the singing — the relationships among people in the choir — many of whom marry each other. They have a ball.

"There isn't any question either that from the college's point of view that they are perhaps our most valuable public relations asset — in terms of conveying to people across America and in other parts of the world the quality of American students — of our students — of our program. When we travel abroad the choir corrects an impression of the American young person that was gained from American television. The choir shows people in Australia, Russia, China, wherever, what a real American young person looks like, sounds like and behaves like. It is a real corrective.

"But having said all of that, the basic purpose of the choir is education. They learn to relate to each other in a healthful way. They learn gracious behavior. They learn to sing as a very competent choir. They learn what it is like to travel in foreign countries and how to behave in strange circumstances. The basic worth of the program is the sheer academic value. It enables these students to be well educated, well-rounded human beings."

Dr. Webb stated his views on the choir in the fall of 1989, some 48 years after the organization started under the direction of A.C. Voran. And what is startling, is the similarity between Webb's summary, and Voran's description of what he hoped to do. "I wanted to do something that would help the kids — that would liberate their personalities — and watching them grow and develop — that's what kept me going."

For those who participated 20 or more years into the program, it is important for us to realize that in the beginning, there was nothing. No choir, no budget, no blueprint for the Centenary College Choir.

Dr. A.C. "Cheesy" Voran

In 1937, Centenary's president Pierce Cline recruited Alvin Clifton Voran from Oklahoma City University, where he was director of choral work. Previous experience included four years at McPherson College in Kansas, where he also started a choir. Voran earned music degrees from McPherson College and the American Conservatory in Chicago. He took graduate courses at Northwestern University in Chicago, and at Peabody Conservatory in Nashville. At Centenary, Voran's assignment was in student personnel — counseling students, working with the student council and building student activity programs and the student center.

In 1941, Ralph Squires, a well-known solo pianist and lecturer, became director of the school of music, and expanded the music program. Squires asked Voran to start a choir. "I jumped at the chance," Voran recalls.

Voran initiated a campus crusade, asking students, "Hey, are you a singer?" Within a year, the group started to grow — in numbers, in enthusiasm and in quality.

1944-45

1967-68

Train travel through the south

1971-72

1966-67

Who is the man Voran? This self-effacing man grew up in Kansas, the oldest son of a German Mennonite farm family. His early plans to become a mechanical engineer soon gave way to lifelong interests in choral music and psychology. He entered McPherson College in 1924 and joined the traveling male varsity quartet. In those days, the word for "cool, man", or "neat" or "keen" was "cheesy." Voran overused it in his collegiate enthusiasm. His peers branded him with the nickname "Cheesy."

Cheesy hints that the transition from farm to campus to life work was difficult for him. He committed his career to smoothing the path for others.

Cheesy's Philosophy

Voran calls his philosophy of work "liberating the personality." In his program, he provided opportunities for students to discover their own areas of natural ability, to help each other with personal and academic problems, and to create a supportive environment where students could "become great people." He modeled appropriate behavior, imposed few rules, stated his confidence in all singers, kept himself available for counseling if necessary, and clearly stated the expectation that he hoped all would be "such wonderful guests that the people we visit will regret to see us go and wish for our return."

He published a choir handbook that articulated the philosophy and expectations. He distributed reprints of management and psychology articles that spoke clearly to him. At each rehearsal, and particularly at choir camp, Cheesy spoke to issues he thought would help students. Then he stood back and watched the young people work and grow. This process brought Voran great personal satisfaction.

Although the college supported the

formation of a choir program and provided a rehearsal room in the old frame music building, there was little, if any, budget. Local businessmen provided the first money for music.

Word of the choir's quality began to spread, and soon came requests for performances off campus. Voran borrowed the college's two buses. Ashamed of their appearance, Cheesy parked them out of sight and asked the choir to walk the last block. To transport equipment, Cheesy bought a four-wheel trailer, and "wore out my car pulling it across the country."

Joyce Minor Kupper, a member of the 43-44 choir, remembers that the choir traveled frequently, even during World War II. "We traveled to Camp Polk to entertain the boys down there. We traveled a lot. We didn't look all that good — we wore black taffeta skirts and any white blouse. We didn't go any place fancy. But, you know, we sounded good."

Voran approached the work with the attitude that if the group did "the very level best it could do, then the program would grow. I looked only at this year's choir. I didn't know what beyond that would bring. But as the opportunities came, we took them."

Military bases, churches, high schools and civic clubs provided the early performance opportunities — and strong demand from these sources continues today.

Building the Network

Throughout his tenure at Centenary, Voran also served as choir director at Noel Memorial Methodist Church. He built a network of contacts in the Methodist Church which kept the group on the road regionally and eventually put the group in Radio City Music Hall.

1947-48

1951-52

1968-69

Cheesy's civic club activities with the Downtown Lions Club yielded many productive business relationships and ideas, and sent the group to international conventions across the United States.

Building the contact network was a high priority. Voran took the Shreveport Chamber of Commerce annual "good will" tour with Shreveport businessmen. On one such train trip, Cheesy collected his first $1,000 contribution for the choir from Col. William C. O'Ferrall.

Civic and convention business grew in Shreveport. At first, civic clubs offered to feed the choir in exchange for a performance. Cheesy would refuse the offer, saying "their meals are already paid for at the college." Then Cheesy would ask for an honorarium instead of food.

The Centenary College Choir on the Stage of Radio City Music Hall, Rockefeller Center, N.Y.
July 6 to September 6, 1961

Dressing Up

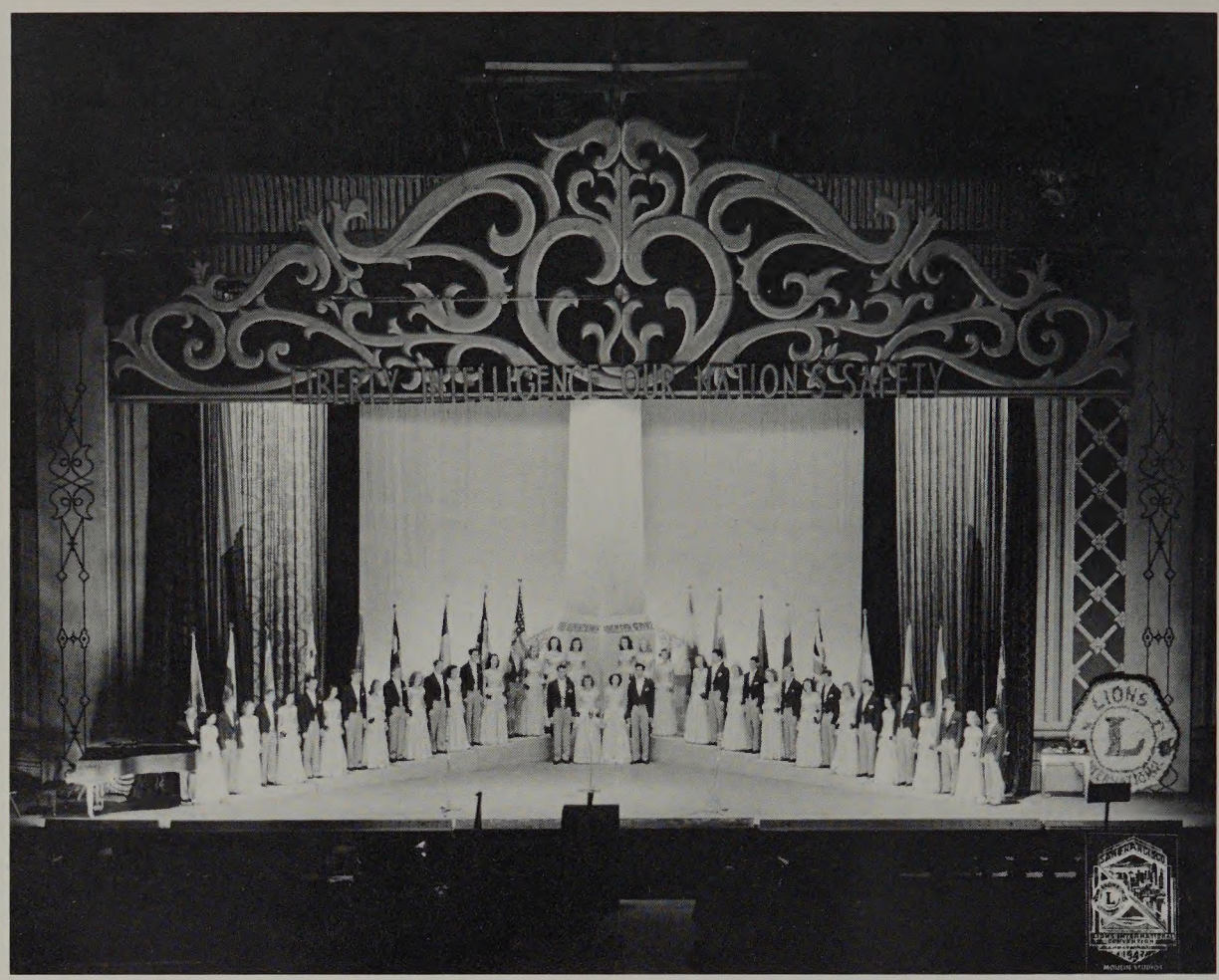
Cheesy credits the Lions Club with changing the choir's appearance. After the program for the downtown Shreveport group, Scottie McIntyre, an influential businessman, told Cheesy, "Your choir looks real good. But it looks like every other damn choir in the country." Cheesy asked what to do about it. "Dress 'em up!" McIntyre replied.

McIntyre challenged Voran to think up something different. Cheesy chose ante-bellum. McIntyre had an artist design "the prettiest dresses with hoop skirts. When Scottie found out what those dresses cost, he changed his mind, and drew another set."

A New Orleans firm made the young men's suits. Malone Piper, an interior decorator, donated gold drapery fabric for the girls' dresses, and the mothers got together to make the dresses. Remembering the experience, Cheesy shakes his head and says, "Never again." Conflict developed as mothers decided the designs wouldn't flatter their daughters. The gold dresses first appeared in photos in 1946-47 and lasted many seasons. The dresses that followed these were stylish formals, purchased through Selber's and Neiman Marcus.

"Later we got some dandies, because Tom Peyton helped me," Cheesy said. The local dress shop owner introduced Michael Benet, a manufacturer of formals in Dangerfield, Texas. The first dress under this plan was $45. When informed of the price (far below the retail prices the choir previously paid), Cheesy quipped, "I believe I'll take two." Over the years, prices have risen. The ruby red dresses introduced during the Golden Anniversary edition of "Rhapsody in View," also by Benet, cost six times more wholesale than the first ones Cheesy bought.

In 1945, Scottie McIntyre also helped the choir get an engagement on "Band



San Francisco, Lions Convention - 1947

1948-49

1958-59

1969-70

of America" for Cities Service Radio out of New York. McIntyre put the Centenary Choir on a train and sent them to New York.

This launched the choir's broadcasting career, which started in Shreveport in 1946 with a commercially sponsored 13-week series. Radio broadcasts continued until 1954, when KSLA became Shreveport's first television station. SWEPCO sponsored the choir's weekly TV series, which was the first locally originated programming besides news at Channel 12. Later, the Centenary Choir show was the first to be broadcast locally in color. SWEPCO still sponsors the choir's annual Christmas Eve Special, continuing a forty-year relationship of business and the arts.

Lions International Conventions

Soon, the local Lions Club suggested that the Centenary Choir be included in the shows produced for Lions Club International Conventions. The first was in San Francisco in 1947. Then New York City, and Chicago, and Atlantic City, and Miami and Denver. Cheesy took the choir to eight conventions where they appeared with stars such as Liberace, Phils Phitale and All Girl Orchestra, and Anita Bryant. Later Will Andress took the choir to two conventions — one in New Orleans and another in Dallas.

Another highlight was the 1952 World Conference of Methodism in San Francisco, where the Centenary College Choir performed the world premiere of "A Faith Is Born," an elaborate musical pageant.

Singing Comes First — After Rehearsal

To build the choir program, Cheesy insisted that all keep music as a top priority even though few members were actually music majors. This required consistent rehearsal. Even in the

beginning, this was a difficult task. Cheesy chose the daily noon hour, a time other classes did not meet. Soon other teachers followed his lead to shorten their work days. Cheesy bargained and bartered to preserve the time. Today the choir still rehearses at noon, in a period cut to about 25 minutes by the college schedule.

And then there was the matter of rehearsal space. In 1941 the choir rehearsed in the music school's recital hall. Access was limited, however, since music students practicing for their recitals had first priority.

Ever resourceful, Cheesy asked for permission to empty and occupy a campus storage building. "It was terrible," Cheesy recalls. "In the winter we rehearsed under blankets." The roof leaked and there were holes in the floor." But the choir loved it. A sign proclaimed "This Is THE Place!"

From it the choir originated its weekly radio broadcast for KWKH. In the late 40s, businessman W.C. "Raz" Rasberry, Sr. sponsored the programs — first for Half Past Seven O'Clock Coffee and later for Forest Park Cemetery. For the coffee shows, which aired at 7:30 on Wednesday evening, Rasberry encouraged churches to use the program during prayer meetings. Any church could write in for a free radio as part of the promotion.

The college's decision to build Mickle Hall numbered the days of "The Choir Shack," located at the back door of today's science hall. Cheesy examined the new building's blueprints, and claimed the vast and vacant attic.

The choir moved in "before the roof was on. The workers would gather around eating their lunch while we sang. Then they would go back to work, and we would have to quit because they made so much racket — like hundreds of woodpeckers," Cheesy remembers.

Stan Menking and his wife Betty Kennedy Menking recall the attic rehearsal space of the early '50s. "It

1946-47

1961-62

1949-50

1970-71

wasn't nice and finished out the way it is today," Menking said. "It was just curtained off. It was hot in the summer time and cold in the winter. And all of the older choir members kept telling us how much better things were." Later, Mr. and Mrs. G.M. Anderson provided the funds to build and air-condition more comfortable quarters.

Choir Camp

The Menkings say the "things are much better now than they used to be" stories also applied to choir camp. In the early 50s, choir camp was held on Lake Bistineau at Beenaire, the lake home of Mr. and Mrs. Luther Beene.

Choir camp grew out of a need for more rehearsal time, Cheesy said. In his previous choral work, Cheesy realized groups weren't prepared for public concerts until the end of the first semester. Before the fall of 1942 he stook 15 singers to a government camp on Caney Lake near Minden. "It was pretty rough," he remembers.

That year the choir performed for the Shreveport Women's Department Club, and there Mrs. Beene, a leader in local musical activities, took interest in the group. Soon Mr. Beene and Cheesy toured the Beenes' Lake Bistineau retreat and decided to move choir camp there. "It was designed for a group much smaller than our 49 members, but we made do," Cheesy said. Two people filled up the bathrooms. "It inspired a spirit of cooperation." Cheesy laughs. The girls got the bedrooms, and the boys slept out on the screened porch, which also served as the rehearsal space. Mrs. Hudgings, longtime cafeteria chief revered for excellent food, sent menus and two cooks. Swimming and boating balanced the rigorous rehearsal schedule. A ten-day choir camp became an institution, preceding each fall school term. This choir camp is still unique among collegiate choirs today.

Choir camp serves many purposes; the first is musical preparation; secondly, the group bonds and becomes a family. Third, the choir's operational structure is organized for the year. And fourth, the wardrobes are fitted, and the choir poses for its annual group picture.

Camp continued at Beenaire for 13 years until 1957. A.J. Hodges, another prominent Shreveport businessman, wanted more music in his newly developing Hodges Gardens. He had already engaged the choir for Easter sunrise services for two or three years before issuing the invitation for choir camp.

For the first camp at Hodges Gardens in 1957, the choir moved into the lavish island home Hodges and his wife Nona Trigg Hodges were building.

By the next year, the choir's own Dedication Lodge, named for the choir's theme song by Robert Franz, was ready for occupancy. The lodge housed choir camp through the fall of 1969. Mr. and Mrs. Hodges frequently invited the choir to the island to entertain guests, or the choir would sneak in for a surprise serenade. After Mr. Hodges' death, camp moved back to the island home for two years until Cheesy's retirement in the spring of 1972.

Choir camp moved to SWEPCO's East Texas lodge on Lake 'O the Pines in 1972 and 1973. Then in the fall of 1974, it returned to Hodges Gardens and Dedication Lodge, where it has been held each year since.

The Gardens' scenic beauty provides a perfect setting for the choir's annual color photograph. In the beginning, Cheesy chose to put the choir in unusual settings "because no one else was doing it. It set us apart." The Grabills took the first two photos. In 1948 J.E. Hampson began the scenic series, continued since 1970 by his son Frank. These pictures have won 22 national awards in professional photography association competitions.

Far East - 1956

1962-63

1945-46

1965-66

Getting Organized

Even today, Cheesy insists that he had little to do with the fame the Centenary Choir achieved. He wants the singers to get the spotlight. In performances, he refused to take bows, moving to the side and directing the choir in a group bow. When it comes to the organization, however, he takes the credit. "I've always been a nut about organization," he says. "To move an organization, you've got to be organized."

So from day one, there was a plan. "I felt like each singer needed some kind of an assignment. It made them feel like they were a part of the group," Cheesy said.

By the end of choir camp, singers knew their duties for the entire performance season. The massive task of moving the choir and all its equipment was divided into specific tasks, with a person assigned to each task. Such attention to detail makes it possible for the choir to set up or reload in under 15 minutes.

Choir Size and Auditions

As the program grew, more students wanted to join. Practical considerations determined choir size. Forty-nine was the number that Cheesy could take on the road in one bus, with two men driving the equipment truck.

Each year, 12 to 15 places opened up. "My audition was short, but it told me what I wanted to know," Cheesy said. It began in Cheesy's office with an interview. He tested musical knowledge and vision without glasses. Then he took the singer on a walk across campus to the Mickle Hall rehearsal room for the musical audition.

"I learned two things on that walk," Cheesy said. "I wanted to see what kind of conversation they would create or be interested in. And I wanted to see how they walked." Cheesy wanted personalities that blended well with the group — that traveled well and represented the choir and the college well. "There were two things I couldn't measure in the audition. One was character, and one was industry. But their words and actions — that walk told me a lot."

Cheesy was keenly interested in academic ability. "We kept a busy schedule. And Centenary is a pretty tough school. I wanted kids in the choir who could keep up." Voran emphasized that choir was no excuse for poor grades, and if a singer's grades sagged, he called him or her in immediately for counseling. He encouraged a struggling student to work with another who excelled. "It worked. Our average was always higher than the campus norm." This program continues today — with Dr. Andress engaging tutors if needed.

Far East Tours of 1956 and 1957

In 1956 the Centenary Choir made its first international trip. The invitation to entertain United Nations troops in the Far East came to the college through U.S. Congressman Overton Brooks and the State Department. "It was a terrific experience. But it was no pleasure ride," Cheesy says.

The six-week tour took 29 singers, Cheesy and college President Joe J. Mickle to Japan, Okinawa and Korea. Outside of the U.S., the choir took military planes where "inflight lunches" left much to be desired — including sandwiches "that must have been two days old," bitter juice and boiled eggs.

1954-55

1964-65

1957-58

1952-53

Ground transportation offered other adventures. On Army buses, the singers wore masks over their noses and mouths as protection against choking dust. In Korea, the choir traveled in a caravan with armed military police in the front and the rear of the column. Choir members were warned never to get off of a clearly defined path because of land mines.

The choir lived under conditions much like those portrayed in the television series "M*A*S*H." Showers were in tents. Restrooms were Army latrines.

Accommodations in performance halls varied — some well equipped, others cramped and makeshift. At one location, hot tar melted off of the roof and dripped on a tenor's white coat. In the heat and humidity, singers perspired, clothes never dried between performances, and cleaning service was unavailable. By the trip's end, suits and dresses alike mildewed, looked terrible and smelled worse.

The commander of the Kedena Air Force Base wanted the Centenary Choir to perform for its Easter Sunday services. This second trip, from March 28 to April 28, 1957, took the choir out of the spring semester for a month. Study periods compensated for missed class time, and the group scored its highest academic average ever that year.

Current Centenary Choir director Dr. Will K. Andress remembers the second tour vividly. "Cheesy threw me to the wolves."

"I owe Will a debt of gratitude for that," Cheesy says. A typhoon had just passed Okinawa and the troops were restless. For this concert, the theater was full, and the soldiers refused to get quiet. "I had tried everything else, so I decided to try a soloist. I called on Andress and made the horrible mistake of introducing him as Willie, which we called him in those days." The soldiers started hooting his name. "So he walks out there and announces his number, and it was a sacred number — a beautiful song and he could sing it well. I thought, 'Oh my God! A sacred number.' I nearly died. Well, he walked out there and he sang it and he got those boys. And from that time on they listened to us and gave us a tremendous reception."

1956-57

Radio City Music Hall

On one of his trips to New York City, Cheesy visited Radio City Music Hall. He heard that a college show band had performed there, and mentioned it to President Mickle. During a visit to New York, Mickle found a receptive audience in the Radio City Music Hall president, a Methodist. The Hall sent arranger Will Irwin to Shreveport to audition the Centenary College Choir. Soon Radio City Music Hall engaged the choir for up to seven weeks during the summer of 1961.

The show and its accompanying movie "Fanny" played to packed houses (6,500 capacity), four shows per day for nine weeks, playing to an estimated audience of 1.5 million. Backstage, choir members made many friends, impressing stage managers and elevator operators alike with their courtesy, professionalism and enthusiasm.

1959-60

1953-54

1973-74

The choir was invited back to Radio City Music Hall in 1967. "Barefoot in the Park," the show preceding the choir's performance slot proved to be a box office hit, delaying the opening of "Up the Down Staircase" and the choir's performances until Sat. August 12, 1967. After two weeks, the choir packed up and returned to Shreveport for choir camp and the start of a school year.

Where Did the Money Come From?

From the beginning, the college provided little, if any, money to fund choir operations. As the group began to grow and earn money, a college business manager proposed a new deal, in the late forties, more funding if choir earnings went into the school pot. The catch was that the choir expense budget was limited to $5,000 per year. Cheesy declined the offer and countered that the choir would earn its own way.

Shreveport businessmen stepped in to offer guidance and support. Henry Weisman, president of M.L. Bath Company, generously shared ideas and contacts. N.C. McGowen, head of the United Gas Corporation, took special interest, first offering $5,000 to buy new sets of costumes for both the men and the women, and then helping to raise funds. McGowen recruited a committee, created a mailing list and solicited $100 contributions from "Friends of the Choir." The $100 raised in 1950 is worth $542 in 1991 dollars.

Community-wide support for the choir grew. In 1962 Mr. Weisman interrupted the choir's mid-semester tour to bring the group home for a surprise announcement — the Centenary Choir won the first prestigious Salesman of the Year award for its work across the nation promoting Shreveport.

Touring paid for itself, the television series paid well, local appearances earned honoraria and contributions underwrote the rest of the operating expenses (choir camp, music, equipment, clothes, cleaning bills, etc.). The college provided some scholarships, and individuals endowed others. Dr. J. D. Woolworth and later Mr. and Mrs. John Lund provided trust funds for the choir. The biggest scholarship contribution during Cheesy's tenure came from Mrs. G.M. Anderson. In recent years, Mr. and Mrs. Samuel M. Sharp provided the annual scholarship to most of the choir members. Memorial scholarships had also been set up to honor Don Garner and Shannon Brown. Mrs. James Smitherman has provided a scholarship for an accompanist.

During the school year of 1971-72, Cheesy made the decision to retire. Alums threw a party for him that summer at the Shreveport Convention Center, and bought him a new car.

Dr. William Ballard

That summer college president John Allen and music school dean Dr. Frank Carroll named Dr. William Ballard as Cheesy's successor. Ballard had a Ph.D. in music history and literature from Northwestern University in Evanston, where he was director of choral music for 16 years.

In his two years as director, Ballard emphasized masterworks, more traditional music programming for fewer concerts and liturgical music. He formed the College Chamber singers and a Community Choral Society. He took the choir on a tour of the British Isles during January of 1974. There the group performed in the cathedrals at Winchester, Salisbury, Gloucester and Ely, among others. As tourists they slogged about Stonehenge in the rain,

1955-56

1974-75

1972-73

Far East Tour - 1956

1976-77

visited Shakespeare's Stratford and spent a week in London during an energy strike. On their last night abroad, an anonymous donor treated the group to an English feast with seven courses at the Elizabethan Room of the Gore Hotel.

In the spring of 1974, Ballard accepted an offer to become the director of the San Francisco Boys Choir. This set the stage for another major personnel change.

Dr. Will K. Andress

In the summer of 1974, Dr. Will K. Andress's dream came true when Dr. Carroll and President Allen offered him the position of director of the Centenary College Choir. First United Methodist Church of Shreveport, where Will was already director of music, allowed him to assume these additional duties — an arrangement which continues today.

Since graduating from Centenary in 1961, Will earned a graduate degree in church music from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., a second master of music from East Carolina University and a doctorate from Florida State University in 1971. Will taught and conducted a choral group at East Texas Baptist College in Marshall, Texas, before returning to Shreveport to develop the music program at First United Methodist Church.

Will had watched choir operations carefully in his years as a singer and officer. "I remembered things I had learned at Centenary. This included the way I related to groups. For example,

Cheesy did not loose his temper, always giving the benefit of the doubt to the students. I've probably been burned a few times, but I believe this is the right thing to do. In fact, most of the lessons and philosophies of the '50s and early '60s are still appropriate now. The choir handbook has had very little updating because the rules and practices carry forth to today," Will says.

Back on the Road

In his first years, Will set out to strengthen the choir by increasing the number of singers and the number of performances, renewing strong ties with choir alumni, and enlarging the choir's financial base.

"I was not faced with the problem of being Cheesy's immediate successor, so I was able to come in as my own person," Will recalls. "Of course, I was Cheesy's student, but felt free to be my own person. I believe in providing a quality program that offers variety and where young people can look good and be the best in American youth — which they are.

"I continue to use the many great sacred choral pieces that never seem to go out of style. Some of the secular music has changed with time, to highlight what is going on in music circles today, especially on Broadway or in popular music."

Will saw his primary job as continuing contact with potential students in the recruiting area. And he programmed to satisfy audiences in churches and high schools in Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas and

1950-51

1978-79

1990-91

1980-81

Oklahoma. "We try to entertain and inspire those audiences. We want them to feel that it was worth coming to the program. As Cheesy used to say, and I firmly believe this, a lot of the people were brought to the concert under duress. I program, therefore, for a varied audience, mixing the pieces — light and heavy, sacred and secular."

To increase the variety of music, Will commissions new work from leading composers, such as Jean Berger, Ema Lou Diemer, Alice Parker, Samuel Adler and Mark Hayes. He seeks a variety of performance opportunities, and put the choir on programs with Bob Hope, Barry Manilow and other celebrities.

The other important dimension of the choir program, in Will's view, is to provide life-enriching experiences for the young people - helping them to do the right thing at the right time. Will estimates that the group spends three months together each year, and he strives to make that experience worth the time — time filled with relationships that are life lasting. "Here they meet life-long friends. Many marry. I have had some thank me for finding their best friends for them."

Will also believes in providing professional musical experiences, such as performing with the Shreveport Symphony, in musicals, in oratorio, at Elizabethan dinners, or in producing TV shows and recordings. "Those going on in music gain experience that will benefit them in their careers," Will says. "Being able to perform solo work with the choir 40 or 50 times a year means they have been in front of hundreds of thousands

of people. This gives them composure and confidence unavailable in more limited performance experiences. In competitions, our students shine." Will sought to strengthen ties to the music school, carefully coordinating schedules, while providing expanded performance opportunities for music majors.

The Travel

Will wanted the choir to travel more extensively, and set out to build an international network. He built new relationships through congressional representatives — "Senator Johnston is an honorary choir member"— and through the military commanders stationed at Barksdale Air Force Base, General Richard Lawson and General James McCarthy. Will also nurtured connections with the United Methodist Church.

The choir's travel log now includes 28 countries around the world. It has performed for the Queen of Denmark, the Prime Minister of Thailand, the President of Switzerland, President Ronald Reagan, Mrs. Jimmy Carter, and ambassadors, generals and admirals by the dozen. The travel party is often expanded to included other Centenary faculty and staff, community leaders, and choir friends, as well as Will's fun-loving and supportive wife, Julia.

Dr. Webb says, "Those trips are such a vital part of the choir experience that they ought to be considered a necessity." Even the local tours provide an educational experience, as young people from one part of the country visit homes in another.

Temple of Good Harvest, China - 1983

1979-80

1975-76

1987-88

The heightened experience of international travel is even more challenging. Dr. and Mrs. Webb, who have accompanied the choir on every international tour since 1977, take pride in reporting that choir students behave appropriately — even in unusual conditions and in spite of language barriers.

Each trip yields a rich collection of experiences for all travelers, now include other Centenary faculty members and friends of the choir. Scrapbooks and written travelogues capture the details. Trip highlights become part of choir mythology, and Will retells these stories each year at choir camp.

Not Just Any Ministers

There's the story about the European tour of 1977. In a Swiss church in Blumenstein, Will and the pastor communicated in scattered English and German. As the choir dressed in cramped conditions, the pastor excitedly told Will the choir had been invited to immediately go to another location for a command performance before the "ministers." Will, unimpressed at the idea of squeezing in another late-night concert for churchmen, declined. The pastor persisted, dragging Will to the parsonage telephone, where Will found himself speaking personally with Kurt Fugler, president of Switzerland. Fugler, who spoke excellent English, wanted the choir to perform for a gathering of the Swiss cabinet and their wives. Within hours, the choir traveled through a military barricade to a beautiful Swiss chalet for a memorable evening of entertaining, dining and visiting with the Swiss heads of state. The choir was divided into groups of eight or 10, each group assigned to dine with a cabinet member and spouse.

The winter trip to Russia and Poland in December 1979 and January 1980 provided a multitude of memorable experiences. The trip, arranged through Friendship Ambassadors, turned out to be an adventure in cultural exchange in a time of international upheaval. The Centenary Choir was one of the last groups to cross into Iron Curtain countries before the Russian invasion of Afghanistan returned the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. to Cold War relations. Since communications were difficult, and exact destinations and dates were unknown to choir relatives, concerns for the group hightened when President Carter cut off all cultural exchange and U.S. grain sales just after the choir entered the U.S.S.R.

Meanwhile, the choir, oblivious to the international upheaval (there was no open media coverage in 1979-80 inside the U.S.S.R.) coped with the bad food, dirty overnight train trips, and cramped hotel accommodations in Moscow, Riga and Lenningrad. Upon return to Moscow, the Soviet guides assigned to the choir demanded that Will contact the U.S. Embassy and send a telegram to the U.S. State Department reporting that the group was safe and receiving good treatment. During that call that Will learned about the disintegration of U.S.-Soviet relations and the concerns of the folks back home. Telegrams sent to The Shreveport Times put the choir on the front page, and reassured families.

Taj Mahal, India - 1987

1986-87

Delphi, Greece - 1985

1988-89

In Hitler's Room

The trip continued into Poland, where access to world news was more open. The atmosphere remained one of strain and international intrigue. Dr. Webb led the interim studies, a for-credit course on the works of Dostoevski. In Wroclaw, he conducted a lecture in Will's hotel room. According to hoteliers, that room was Hitler's, and from there he directed the destruction of Poland. There was an eerie feeling in the room as Webb lectured on the deep psychological undercurrents in Dostoevski's novels where the Russian author probed the problems of evil and troubled men.

Only when the choir prepared to leave Warsaw to return to the U.S. did tension mount. A woman behind the counter in the Warsaw airport decided to charge a $600 penalty for the choir's wardrobe trunks. Will refused to pay, and ordered the students, spread across all customs and security stations in the airport, to sit down on their personal luggage and refuse to move until the agent changed her mind. Within 15 minutes, the choir effectively shut down customs and passport control and attracted the attention of military guards. An argument followed among the clerk, the choir's Polish guides, the military and Will. Finally the woman, nicknamed "Brunnhilde" by Will, harshly said, "Go." The group moved out to the airplane, but Will was detained for another 30 minutes. Customs searched all of his luggage and his person, harassing him. "I was the only American left in the airport, and I did have an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach," Will remembers. "But finally they took me out in a big bus by myself to the airplane, and we flew home."

The choir flew home, grateful to be American, and hundreds of pounds lighter because of the bad food and long cold walks. At the Shreveport airport, television cameras from eight stations in Arkansas, Louisiana and Texas covered the choir's return. High profile news coverage of the trip continued for several weeks afterwards.

"God Bless America"

The summer of 1980, strong patriotic emotions turned a performance before a North Atlantic Treaty Organization party into a memorable event. The choir performed for a July 4th picnic in Brussels, Belgium. More than 100,000 people attended. Later inside NATO Headquarters, General Richard Lawson set the stage for an unusual evening of singing and mingling with the heads of state. Gen. Lawson knew the choir well, since the group had performed for him often during his tenure as Barksdale commander. Before the NATO event, Lawson told the Andresses and the Webbs that he wanted the NATO leaders, who have limited contact with "real Americans" to experience the vitality of American young people.

The evening began with a social period. Then the choir sang for 30 minutes. During intermission they mixed with the guests — including the Greek ambassador, a Canadian general, the Ambassador from Turkey, a French ambassador and his wife — establishing some long-lasting relationships. Then the choir performed again for 30 minutes and mingled again.

1985-86

1982-83

Heidelberg, Germany - 1991

Bangkok, Thailand - 1987

1984-85

The program concluded with the Irving Berlin medley ending in "God Bless America." The students, realizing the importance of this gathering, came in touch with strong patriotic emotions. "Everybody in the audience, including a lot of us, was crying," recalls Chris Murphy. Will still shows strong emotions when he tells this story. "When we finished, I turned around to see the Norwegian admiral who had a big beard — with tears rolling down his cheeks." The audience rose to its feet in an applauding ovation.

Then General Lawson made a short speech, recalled in remarkable matching detail by the students and adults who were present, including Don and Rene Webb, and Tim and Polly Hibbs. "A lot of people in the world think that America is fat and over the hill and has no will to survive, including some of you," Lawson said. "But I can tell you from the looks on the faces of these young people that America does have the strength, does have that love of country. We are going to survive. And we have the strength to help any of you who have the will and the drive to do so as well."

Lawson later told the group that the evening with its experiences and new relationships had been one of the most meaningful between the U.S. and its NATO allies. Many made renewed commitments to the alliance and the defense of Europe.

In 1982, the choir traveled to China and Japan. Mr. Seisi Kato, chairman of Toyota in Japan, had been introduced to Centenary through Dr. and Mrs. Mickle, and Shreveport Toyota dealer Hoyt Yokum and his wife Penny. Mr. Kato arranged for the choir's Tokyo appearances at Aoyama Gaukin University. These arrangements included personally meeting the choir at the

Tokyo airport, attending the university concert, transporting the audience — in block after block of Toyota buses — back to the Pacific Meridian where he hosted an elaborate reception with food for nearly 2,000 people. A singing group from the university provided additional entertainment. Mr. Kato presented Dr. Webb and Will with Japanese coats in Toyota designs. Will presented Mr. and Mrs. Kato with personalized Centenary Choir jackets.

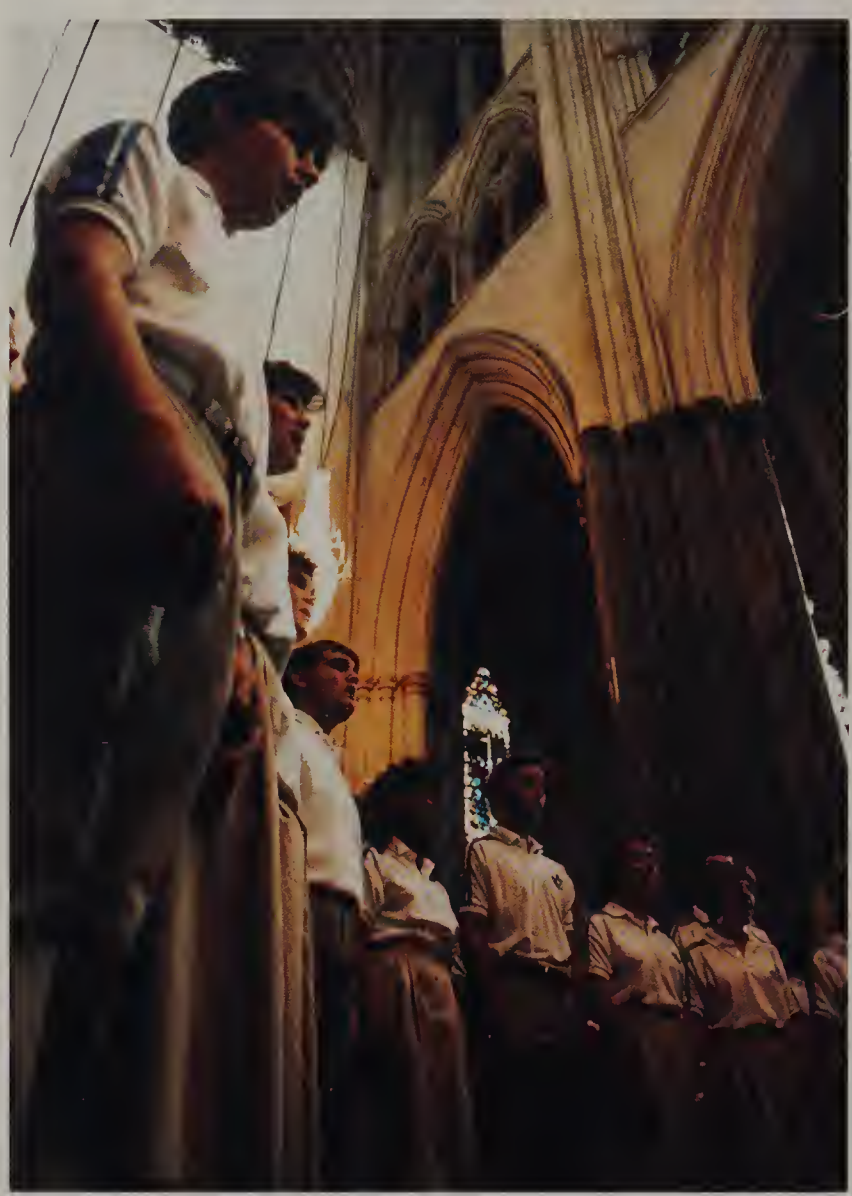
Chairman of the Board at 4 a.m.

The very next morning, the choir rose for 4 a.m. breakfast in order to meet their morning flight out of Tokyo. Downstairs, they were surprised to see Mr. and Mrs. Kato, waiting to have breakfast with the choir and wish them bon voyage. On the way to the airport, several of the students wondered aloud if the chairman of the board at General Motors would have gone to this kind of trouble to befriend a group of students.

In 1983, Mr. Kato visited Centenary. A local television reporter asked him what brought him to Shreveport. "I came to visit the Centenary Choir," he replied. While the choir performed for Mr. Kato at a luncheon meeting, a devastating fire swept through the choir loft.

Support from choir alumni, churches, friends and organizations such as the Downtown Lions Club began to pour in. Local architect and choir alum George Jackson donated his services to redesign the choir facilities. Soon a check arrived from Toyota in Japan. It was $5,000 from Mr. Kato to help rebuild the choir's home.

1989-90



Westminster Abbey - 1987

1981-82

Great Hall of Parliment, Australia - 1989

In 1985, the choir made its debut in the Vatican — with two hours' notice. Bishop Woodrow Hearn, a United Methodist Bishop with close ties to the choir, contacted Archbishop Hannan in New Orleans about the possibility of the choir singing at the Vatican. "We had heard nothing, so we assumed that this wouldn't be possible," Will recalls. So the choir was spending a Sunday morning in Rome sightseeing. Choir custom requires that each person tell at least one other about their plans for free time. At about noon, Will received a call from the Monsignor Coloini who was in charge of music at the Vatican. He invited the choir to become the first Protestant choir to sing Mass at St. Peter's at 3 p.m.

Will started rounding up the singers. By 2 p.m., the entire choir and most adults in the traveling party gathered in St. Peters. The Monsignor chose pieces out of the choir's music folder, chose an order, and agreed with Will on signals. "He cued, and we sang." The organist of St. Peter's accompanied on all but the a cappella pieces. "The sound was awesome," say choir members Celia and Ron Whitler. The Catholics in the choir had communion as the rest of the choir sang "Tenebrae factae sunt." "They had received a special blessing from the Archbishop, and they were glowing," says Celia. "It was one of the most moving experiences I have had with the choir," Will says.

In 1987, the choir traveled around the world in one summer trip. In Thailand they were treated royally by Koonying Pancrewa Yungchiyoot, wife of the commanding general of the army. For the King's favorite charity, she organized two benefit concerts which the Thai prime minister attended. In New Delhi, India, one-third of the choir passed out from the 100-plus-degree heat during a 9 p.m. outdoor performance, sponsored by the Ford Foundation. Nearby, thousands of Indian soldiers provided a ring of security to

protect the choir and its audience from Sikh terrorists. Food and air conditioning revived the singers, who visited the Taj Mahal the next day before traveling on to Britain.

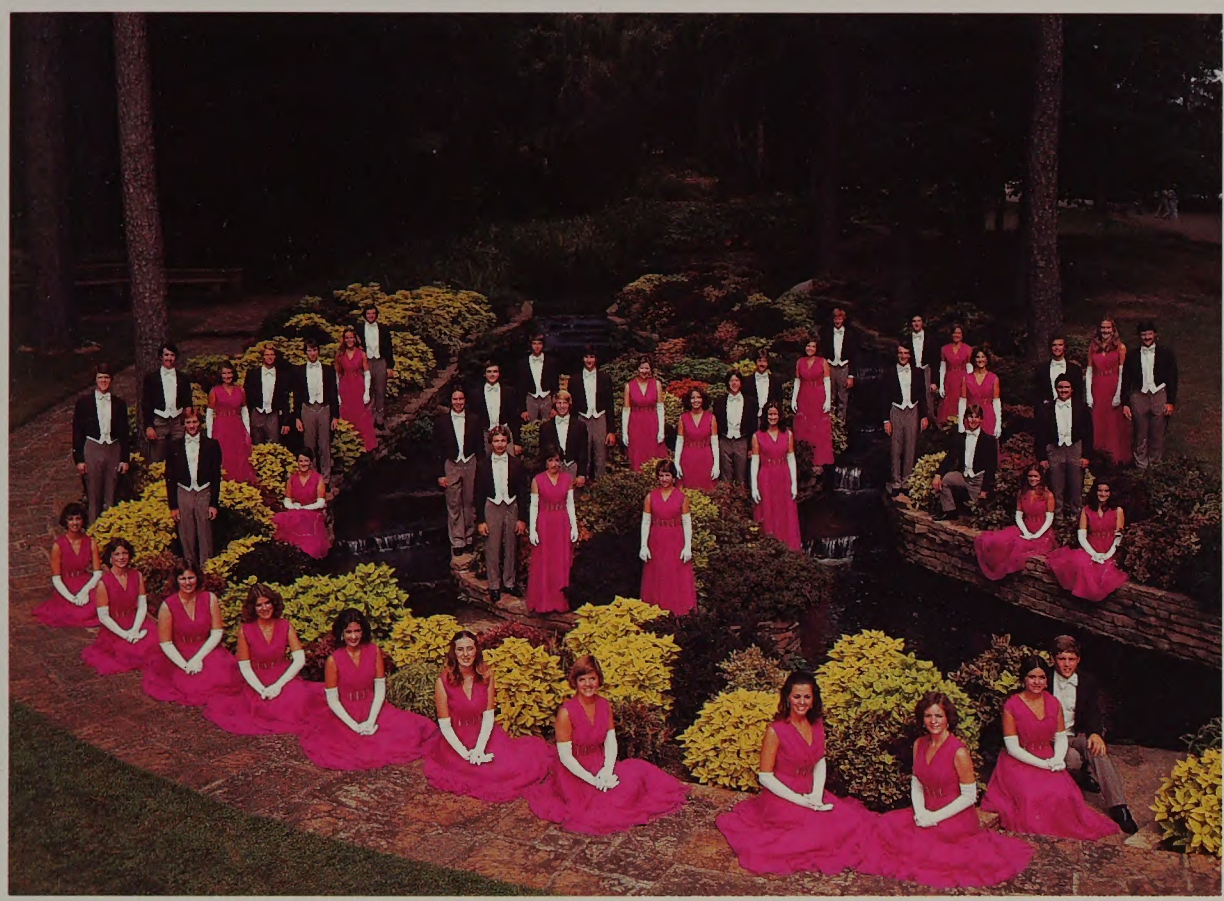
The Future

After 18 years with the Centenary Choir, Will feels growing personal commitment toward ensuring the program's quality and future. "Students need this experience more than ever. They need to learn how to do the right thing at the right time — to know what to say and what to do — to know when to give and to step outside of themselves. In addition to developing their musical and performance abilities, this program provides them with ample opportunities to learn these values and act appropriately."

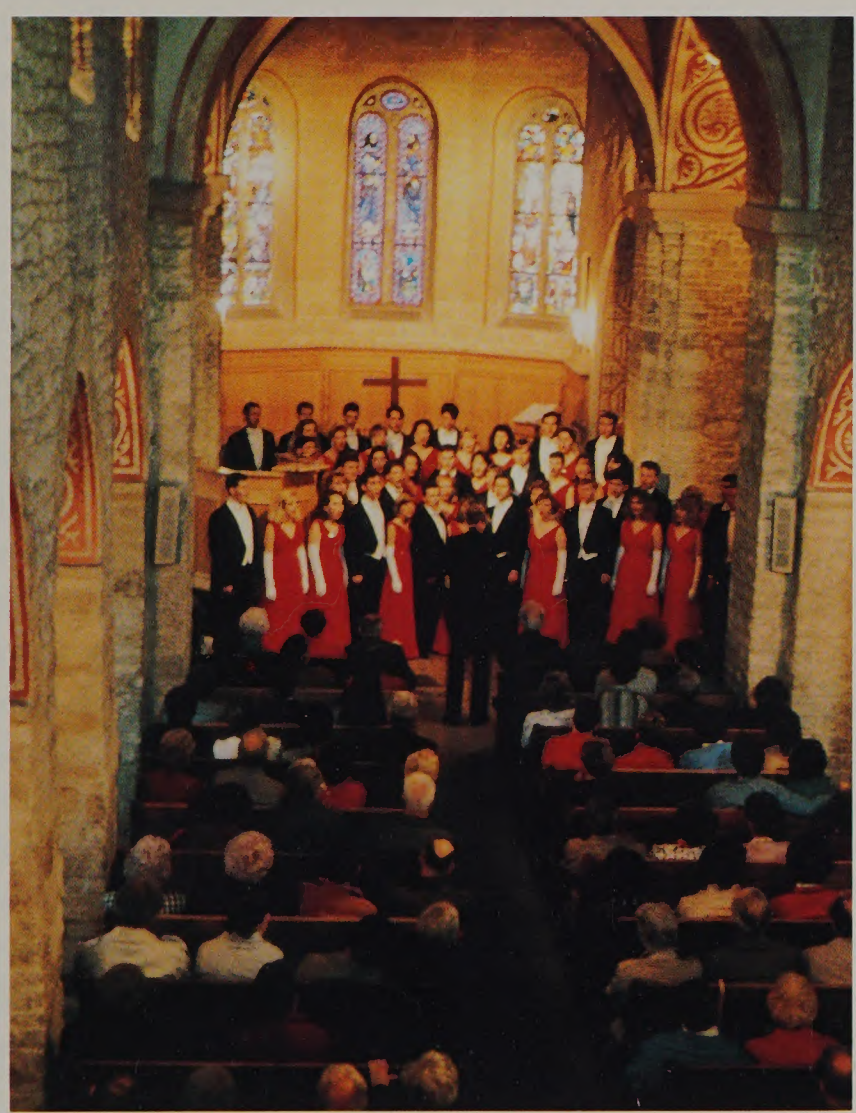
The question of how to continue the Centenary College Choir raises many issues. How will equipment, gowns and tuxes, and scholarships be provided tomorrow when today's benefactors are gone? Will there be "Friends of the Choir" in the future, those like Col. O'Ferrall, Scottie McIntyre, N.C. McGowen, Henry Weisman, Julius Szodomka, Ruth Patterson, Dr. J.D. Woolworth, Gertie and G.M. Anderson, A.J. and Nona Trigg Hodges, Nellie P. Kilpatrick, Virginia Shehee, Gladys Hurley, Doyle Pickett, Hoyt and Penny Yokem, Brad Mayo, John and Ena Lund, Sam and Mildred Sharp, Herman Williamson, Harvey and Alberta Broyles, George Williams, Ed and Sue Rice, G.W. James, Bob and Gwen Murphy, Frances Smitherman, Jody and Linda Ferguson, Hale and Margaret Shadow, Dr. Thomas Glass and organizations like the Woolworth, Woolf, Wheless, Beaird and Poindexter Foundation's, SWEPCO, and the Commercial National Bank? These generous spirits and hundreds of others, have made it possible for the choir to

1983-84

General McCarthy's Home, Stuttgart - 1991



1977-78



Rougemont, Switzerland - 1991

be what it has become — a nurturing musical and educational experience for students who inspire millions all over the world with music.

How will talented students who can contribute to and benefit from Centenary College and the Choir be able to afford the rising cost of a private liberal arts education?

Those of us who enjoyed the benefits of this program should be asked to be a part of its future. The Centenary College Choir enters its second 50 years blending the music of yesterday and today, shaping the lives of young people, and forging productive relationships on campus and around the world.

If we have the privilege of being a Centenary Choir alum we can continue its legacy. We can reexamine the values we learned and apply them to our lives at work and home. We can join our voices with others in our hometown choirs. We can recruit new talent for the college and the choirs of today and tomorrow. We can make sure it continues, giving to others what it gave to us - the lessons and the magic of the music.

In closing, let's look at a couple of those letters that most of us have sent at one time or another when we reflecton our years in the Centenary Choir.

"My two years in the choir are among the happiest in my life. To be reunited with so many friends and to sing in'Rhapsody" one more time is more than any old retired tenor could ever ask," Charles A. Taylor, 1954-56.

"The four years I spent in the choir were some of the most rewarding and satisfying of my life. The entire experience (friendships, performances and travel) was one which I feel fortunate to have had. . . I am sure I am not the first to express such feelings, and I doubt that I will be the last," Chris Murphy, 1980-84.

In closing we can turn to the lyrics of "A Hymn to Music," the choir's television theme song for many years.

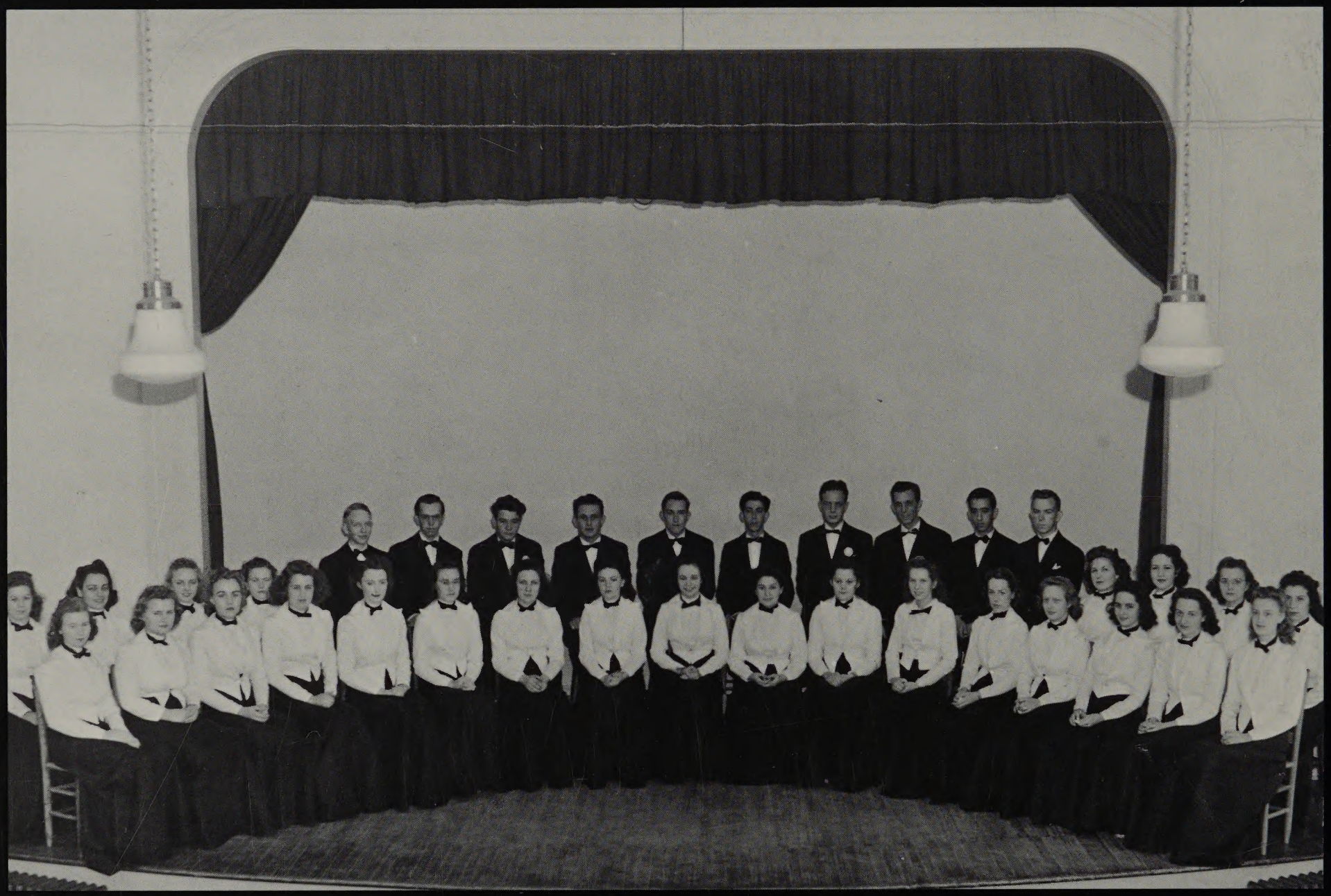
"0 sacred art, 0 music fair, Our thanks to thee."

About the Author

Cynthia A. Lewis is one of the half-dozen choir alums who sang with all three directors in the transitional period from fall 1971 to spring 1975. While in the choir, she assumed an active role in choir public relations, structuring publicity programs and strategy. She was able to attend Centenary because of a generous Frost Foundation Scholarship and a work-study job in the library archives. Upon graduation she went to work at The Shreveport Times, where as feature writer and editor she covered a wide variety of subjects, including music and dance, and won many awards. In this role, she traveled with the choir to Russia and Poland in 1979-80. In 1980 she began her dream career in arts and non-profit administration as public relations manager of The Dallas Opera. Since then, Ms. Lewis has enjoyed the challenges of promoting and increasing earned and contributed income for the Houston Symphony Orchestra, Fort Worth Ballet, The Science Place, Dallas Children's Theater and Dallas Black Dance Theatre. Her next goals— to serve many agencies with a specialized service company — or to guide a major non-profit as director of fund-raising or executive director.

Acknowledgements

These individuals deserve recognition for their contributions to this document. First, thanks to Drs. Voran, Ballard and Andress for accepting me into their choirs. Cheesy and Will have put hours into this project. Also, thanks to Don and Renee Webb for interviews. Thanks to dozens of choir alums, who have and have not been quoted. Those not quoted who must be mentioned are Carolyn Garison, for checking out facts, dates and spellings; and Jim Montgomery, for that final and most important edit. Thanks to the late Rosalee Voran, who always told the truth as she saw it, and to Julia Ann Andress, a great friend and source of emotional support. And not least, I want to thank all of those others who formed my ability to create this document — my choir friends, my present and former employers, all of my Centenary teachers (particularly the late Webb Pomeroy for trying to teach me to ask the right questions), and my immediate family — who encouraged me to get an education from the day I was born. Thank You! — Cynthia Lewis.



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